

Risky trade-offs in 'ZitGoed!'

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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the premise that participatory projects are characterised by risky trade-offs between various participants, wherein power relations are continuously reshuffled in on-going interactions between people, their actions and the objects that mediate these actions (Huybrechts, 2014). To illustrate this, we will discuss 'ZitGoed!' a project focussing on the participatory design of school furniture with and for children aged 8 to 10 (www.zitgoed.be). We will describe the participatory design game that we used in this project to alter power relations between the involved children, designers, architects, teachers and parents in order to explore alternative ways of designing furniture. Finally, inspired by the terminology of configuring and reconfiguring participation by Vines et al. (2013), we will reflect on the ways in which we configured the design game. We will research if this configuration allowed the participants – mainly children – to take the participatory process in their own hands and reconfigure this process themselves.

Author Keywords

Design game, participation, children

ACM Classification Keywords

H5.m. Information interfaces and presentation, H5.3 Group and Organisation Interfaces

RISKY TRADE-OFFS

Everyone has a view on the world: a mix between dreams, fears or practical needs that are not necessarily equally represented within a certain context. Participatory Design (PD) tries to confront these views and reshuffle power relations. Bratteteig and Wagner (2012) describe that many of the methods and techniques used in PD are devised to facilitate the sharing of power '*with a minimum of dominance*' (Foucault 1982). Hence, PD can easily be seen as ways to share the '*transformative capacity*' that a project team develops as a common resource (Ibid., p. 47). These authors point to the fact that even in PD processes power still easily resides in the 'trusted expert' and that artefacts are also part of the decision making process (Ibid, p. 49). Because sharing power is not self-evident, PD can be characterised by 'risky trade-offs' between the worldviews of various participants, their

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actions and the objects that play a role in the participatory process, like prototypes, scenarios or food. We use the term trade-offs, because all parties engage in a participatory exchange that takes form as a continuous careful balancing between who wins and loses something (e.g. a design decision by a software developer can narrow down the opportunities the interface designer wants to explore). They are risky, since all parties who engage in a trade-off are uncertain about what the exchanges might bring forth (for further reading on these risky trade-offs, see: Huybrechts, 2014). Our definition of risk is inspired by Lash's (2000) 'risk culture', characterised by uncertainty and continual questioning, which contrasts with Beck's (1992) definition of 'risk society', entailing a new stage in modernity characterised by efforts to know and control risk. We do not see risk in participatory trade-offs as something that can be excluded out of a participatory process, but as something that we can use productively when building trust between participants.

In this paper, we will discuss the trade-offs that take place in the participatory project ZitGoed! and how we wanted to make all participants initiators of these trade-offs. This project is inspired by our desire to allow children to define their own ways of claiming a space in a school environment, thus questioning the design of traditional school furniture's orientation towards the front of the class room and the implications for the existing (power) relations within the school. We collaborated with a group of architects, an expert in ergonomics, children, school staff and family. The trade-offs in the project entail – among others – exchanges between children's experiences of school furniture, our ideas of how children can find their place in a school space, the architectural studio's goal of producing and marketing furniture within a limited amount of time (i.e. a year), the role of contemporary school furniture and the family's vision about school environments. Vines et al. (2013) discuss that the way participation is configured determines how exchanges take place and between whom. In ZitGoed! we experimented with ways to configure participation in a particular school during one year, enabling all participants to reconfigure it.

DESIGN GAME

We created a design game that could be reconfigured and organised by all participants (including the children), in order for them to be potential initiators of the trade-offs with other parties (e.g. the architects', the designers', the family's, etc.). Design games aim for staging

participation, seldom include competition in the sense of ‘winning’ and use rules and game pieces that support the design process (Brandt, 2006; Brandt & Messeter, 2004). The goal of our game was to make a video report that expressed the participants’ views on ‘sitting’ in the school environment and to design furniture (in the broadest sense).



Image 1. Roles

All participants – designers, children and staff – wore masks while collaboratively exploring the school space, which were customised by themselves. Every mask was associated with a role they could choose in organising the design game: a reporter, a camera (wo)man, a planner, an actor and a moderator; all forming one team. For every role, they received basic training from the design research team (e.g. all reporters were trained in interview skills). The masks anonymised the participants in the video footage, but also gave them in a clear role and confidence in taking risks that are characteristic for engaging in a PD process.



Image 2. Workshop actions

The game pieces supported the role they played and the related risks (e.g. the actors had to publicly perform daily school situations). These consisted of tools (a video camera, a microphone, a map, props and a scenario) and a set of stickers to ‘tag’ the furniture and the spaces. The stickers visualised sensory experiences (e.g. hard, light), ‘likes’, ‘bombs’ and ‘warning signs’ (more about the stickers in Huybrechts, Dreessen & Schepers, 2012). The expression of sensory experiences is a technique used in ergonomic studies to indicate comfort levels (Vink, 2004). We used emoticons and symbols for the

experiences to enable easy understanding by children (Desmet, 2005).



Image 3. Tags

The teams made small video reports about ‘sitting’ in the school, related with a specific activity: crafting, playing, writing, reading or listening. Each team collaboratively edited their video throughout sessions where different viewpoints on the activities were ‘traded’ and discussed. In a first editing session the design research team visualised the videos in an interactive overview. Subsequently, the video fragments were discussed and, when necessary, edited with the participants. Based on the edited video reports, design choices were made and the existing furniture in the school was used imaginatively to answer to the concerns and desires expressed in the video reports. Again, the teams were invited to make a video report on the intervention via game rules and pieces. These videos were collaboratively edited and will result in first prototypes of the furniture.

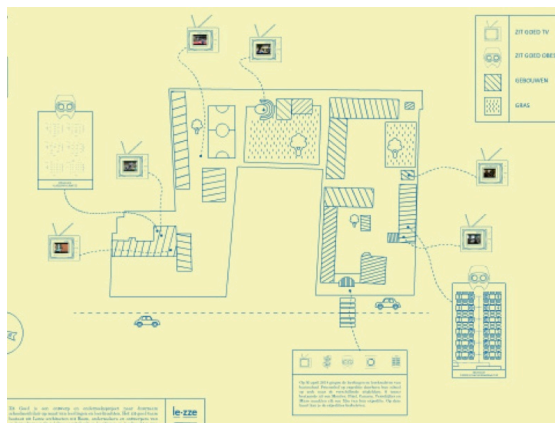


Image 4. Interactive map

For instance, three children performed the activity of ‘writing’ in their classroom. While the reporter was asking questions about it, the camera was filming and the planner marked the conversation in the environment and on the furniture with the stickers. One child said that she felt restricted by the ordering of the furniture. She felt the urge to move and ‘party’ in between writing activities. Another child enjoyed the enclosed feeling that the furniture gave him, since it allowed him to rest and remain stable. Based on the edited video of the writing

activity, we decided to explore these two experiences of restrictedness in depth. We provided the children with a paper map and stickers to self-organise a party/lounge area, making use of the existing furniture and some props. In a next session the children designed, performed and reported the party/lounge situation, using stickers to evaluate the furniture and environment. After the sessions the designers evaluated how the furniture pieces were used, which props were used, how the furniture was organised in the space and what postures were associated with the activity, taking into account the edited video reports of the children and the stickers they used. We concluded that the setup of the party/lounge situation expressed a need for flexibility, wherein the empty space of the classroom can be the starting point for continuous and quick design situations wherein people and furniture are reorganised and extra props are brought into the scene. The resulting furniture prototypes were therefore characterised by lightness, flexibility and modularity.

RECONFIGURING PARTICIPATION

We wanted to configure participation in such a way that it could be reconfigured by the participants (Vines et al., 2013). Specifically, we provided a few simple game rules and game pieces that allowed all participants – including the children – to organise the game by themselves and adapt it to their own needs and preferences. However, we question how much openness we actually leave to the participants for reconfiguring participation. The participants had the agency to coordinate and initiate many of the trade-offs in the design game and learned to use, co-design and gather the game tools. Also, we mainly exchanged sensory content (e.g. touch), because this can be easily addressed by little children (see Desmet, 2005). Still, the structure of the game is mainly thought of by adult designers (see e.g. Vaajakallio, 2012 on this topic), in order to provide participants with enough structure and tools to reconfigure participation. The question is how far we can go in co-designing the basic game configuration with our participants. Would this provide participants with more trust in their agency to take risks in the participatory process? Also, we wonder if we could have gone further in making the material design process of the furniture part of the risky trade-offs between all participants, since a lot of the prototyping took place in our design labs. In the workshop, we want to discuss what aspects of the design game allowed and obstructed all participants to be equal initiators of trade-offs in the PD process. Therefore, we will present an overview of the trade-offs that took place between both human and non-human actors in the PD process, what risks were involved – in the sharing of power - and how trust was built in.

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